

Roye E. Wates

A note of introduction: Good program notes are important. Done well, they are informative and illuminating, enhancing the concertgoer's appreciation of the work and placing the composer's achievement in its cultural and historical context. This concert note by Prof. Wates on one of Mozart's most impressive compositions is an example.

Mozart's Mass in C Minor, K.427/417a (unfinished)

About my moral commitment, yes, that's absolutely right; it flowed out of my pen not unintentionally—I truly made that promise in my heart and really hope to keep it.—When I made it, my wife was still single—but the promise was easy to make because I was determined to marry her as soon as she recovered her health.—Time and circumstances have delayed our trip, as you yourself know;—but as proof that I really made that promise I have the score of half a mass lying here in hopes of getting finished.

(Letter from Mozart to his father, 4 January 1783)

This is the sum total of what we know about Mozart's reasons for composing his monumental *Mass in C Minor*. The work was not commissioned, was performed only once in his lifetime—during the Salzburg visit alluded to here—and was never finished. Three years later its two opening movements formed the basis for his cantata *Davidde penitente*, but that was for a secular occasion and the words were not those of the Catholic Mass. Among his sacred works, this Mass looms as the largest in conception and easily the most flamboyant in style; yet its origins are far from clear.

While stating emphatically that he composed the work for personal reasons, the letter doesn't say what those reasons were. The "promise" bore some relation to Wolfgang and Constanze Mozart's upcoming visit to Salzburg (a city he loathed), and his father, Leopold, was hounding him for repeatedly postponing that—hence Wolfgang's defensiveness ("Time and circumstances have delayed our trip, as you yourself know"). But to tease out more clarity than this would require access to letters we don't have. Why? Because he probably tossed them out. Most of what Leopold or anyone else sent him during his decade in Vienna is lost; of the scores of letters from his father, only one survives, perhaps by accident. It used to be customary to accuse Constanze of destroying such things, but the more likely culprit was Mozart himself.

Examining this one isolated paragraph, it appears that he first had the idea for the Mass during Constanze's illness shortly before they were married in August 1782. That was when he "truly made that promise"—but to do what, exactly? To write a Mass celebrating her recovery; or to take her to Salzburg

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and introduce her to Leopold and his older sister, Nannerl, presenting them with a new Mass to honor the occasion? Both, perhaps? There is still a third possibility. By the time he wrote this letter, Constanze was several months pregnant with their first child: Raimund Leopold would be born the following June and Mozart was ecstatic about it. Whatever the reasons were behind this Mass, they were personal, which probably explains why he received no commission or remuneration for it—even though composing such an enormous work *pro bono* was egregiously impractical for a man whose music had to support himself, his wife, and, soon, their son.

Entrusting their baby to a nurse's care, the young couple arrived in Salzburg at the end of July. In his suitcase Mozart brought with him, in fact, only "half a mass," the two movements already finished before he wrote that letter: the Kyrie and Gloria. Once in Salzburg, he worked on the first half of the Credo and the Sanctus. Some of the Mass's movements are not complete in copies that have come down to us, but a number of scholars dating back to 1901 have reconstructed them. Mozart never wrote the second half of the Credo or any of the Agnus Dei, though he later sketched ideas for the latter.

The *Mass in C Minor* was performed in Salzburg on Sunday, 26 October 1783, as Nannerl Mozart recorded in her diary entry for that day:

To Mass in St. Peter's, where my brother's Mass was performed. All the court musicians were there.

St. Peter's was (and is) a Benedictine abbey, some distance away from the cathedral, the seat of Salzburg's prince-archbishop, Count Hieronymus Colloredo. Nannerl's statement that "all" the court's (i.e., the cathedral's) musicians came over to St. Peter's is astonishing. Granted, they were essential: the abbey had ten singers (five boys, five men) and ten instrumentalists. But if the court musicians were all at the abbey, who performed at the cathedral?

Equally unanswerable is the question of how Mozart's Mass could have been performed incomplete. The feast day of the abbey's second patron saint (the first being, of course, St. Peter), Amand of Worms, was 26 October. When this fell on a weekday, the Credo could be omitted; but in 1783 it was a Sunday, requiring musical substitutions for the Credo's second half and for the Agnus Dei. These might have been supplied from earlier works by Mozart or from works of other composers; the simplest solution would have been plainchant. We may never know what was done. Archival records in St. Peter's are silent about that day, and the Mass was never mentioned again in the (surviving) Mozart family correspondence.

This was the first such work Mozart had written since his "Coronation" *Mass in C Major*, K.317 (1779),¹ and it is utterly unlike its predecessor. In fact, it violates every one of the regulations for sacred music promulgated by Emperor Joseph II (whose Enlightenment ideals and reform-minded

1. The *Mass in C Major* was originally composed for Easter Sunday in 1779, but its use for the Prague coronation of Emperor Leopold II in 1791 gave it the nickname "Coronation," by which it has been known ever since.

government Mozart deeply admired) and, following the Emperor's lead, Prince-Archbishop Colloredo (whom Mozart despised). The rules included a prohibition against solo arias and fugues and required that a Mass must last no longer than forty-five minutes. Above all, music must foster a worshipful atmosphere and not draw attention to itself. As early as 1776 Mozart had complained about these restrictions to his beloved Italian mentor, Padre Martini:

Our church music is very different from that of Italy, all the more so because a complete Mass ... even the most solemn ones, during which the Prince-Archbishop himself presides, may not last more than three quarters of an hour. One needs special training to write this kind of composition, and furthermore it must be a Mass with all the instruments—trumpets, timpani, etc.

(letter of 4 September 1776)

While Mozart adhered more or less to these regulations in his "Coronation" Mass (there is a soprano aria, but a fairly short one), even managing to bring in the whole work in well under thirty minutes, for this new Mass he brazenly defied them all. Why did Colloredo allow it to go forward? Although as a Benedictine abbey St. Peter's was theoretically outside his jurisdiction, he held power over it as well; but he chose not to intercede, perhaps in the fanciful hope that such restraint might lure Mozart back into his service.

The *C-minor Mass* is exceptionally long—nearly equal, if complete, to Bach's *Mass in B Minor* or Beethoven's *Missa solemnis*. All three are considered liturgically unusable for this reason. Yet Mozart's rule-breaking went much further still, embracing every aspect of this work.

The orchestra is the largest he employed in any sacred composition, making those court musicians essential. The overall sonority is thicker and brassier than you may be accustomed to in his music because three trombones are added to horns and trumpets in pairs. Salzburg church music had traditionally reinforced the chorus's alto, tenor, and bass sections with trombones; but here they yield a total of seven brass parts. The absence of clarinets, a widely popular new instrument, is also surprising. By 1783 Mozart was writing regularly for them in orchestral works; later, for the virtuosic Anton Stadler, he composed the Clarinet Quintet, K.581 and the Clarinet Concerto, K.522. Salzburg, however, had no clarinets, which is presumably why there are none in this Mass.

During his futile search for employment elsewhere in 1777 and 1778, the composer, then 21 years old, spent five months in Mannheim, home of Europe's finest orchestra. What most excited him was Mannheim's quartet of principal woodwind players; he had never heard such playing in Salzburg. These musicians so fired his imagination that he immediately began to incorporate expressive, soloistic wind parts into his own music—first in *Idomeneo* (1781), which in fact was written for that orchestra (which by then had relocated to Munich), and later in many other works including this Mass. Indeed, his writing for orchestra was never the same after Mannheim; it didn't have to be, once he moved to Vienna shortly after the *Idomeneo* premiere.

"Every Sunday at 12," Mozart wrote to Leopold in April 1782, "I go to Baron von Swieten's—and there nothing is played but Handel and Bach." Van Swieten, a diplomat, sophisticated musical amateur, and Joseph II's Imperial Librarian, had served in Berlin as ambassador to Frederick the Great, where he acquired a taste for the music of Handel, Bach, and one of Bach's sons, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach. Week by week, Mozart fell in love with this by-then antique music. The first major work to demonstrate its impact is the *Mass in C Minor*, which is saturated from beginning to end with Handelian and Bachian counterpoint. Van Swieten later commissioned Mozart to update several of Handel's works to bring them in line with late 18th-century style. Best known today, from fairly frequent performances and recordings, is the Mozart-Handel *Messiah*.

A final blatant violation of church-music regulations in the *C-minor Mass* is its extensive use of vocal soloists: Soprano I and Soprano II (each performing an aria in addition to their duet together), tenor (for a trio with the sopranos), and bass (for a quartet). We know that one of the sopranos was Constanze Mozart, as Nannerl records in her diary for Thursday, 23 October:

[Attended the] rehearsal of my brother's Mass, in which my sister-in-law sings the solos.

Like Bach's *B-minor Mass* and Beethoven's *Missa solemnis*, the *Mass in C Minor* is written "cantata style," dividing the text of the Ordinary of the Mass into brief segments, each of which is accorded distinctive musical treatment.² The result is an ever-changing musical tapestry—homophonic then polyphonic, solo then choral, minor then major, exuberant then mournful—as Mozart's music responds vividly and often phrase by phrase to words he had known by heart since boyhood.

The Kyrie opens with somber, plaintive, C-minor pleas for God's mercy before yielding to E-flat major and Soprano I's more confident prayer to the Son. This radiant *Christe eleison* bears such a resemblance to vocal exercises Mozart composed for Constanze the previous summer that it seems certain he wrote the first soprano part for her. Soprano II was probably one of Salzburg's two castratos, both of whom were close friends of the Mozart family and well regarded professional colleagues.

The Gloria, divided into seven sections, alternates dramatically — unsettlingly—between joy and sorrow. Following the chorus's jubilant opening, the *Laudamus* is a lightly scored, carefree operatic aria in old-fashioned ABA format. As always in his music, whether for soloists or chorus, Mozart places melismas (vocal runs) with great care to highlight a single, important word: here, *glorificamus*. From this joyful aria, we are jolted first into the darkly driving rhythms of the *Gratias agimus tibi* and then into the *Dominus Deus*, a sunny duet for the two sopranos, and from that into a towering double chorus, the *Qui tollis*. Its intense, double-dotted

2. The Ordinary comprises the Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei, though in this case, as mentioned earlier, the Agnus Dei and the second half of the Credo are missing.

rhythms, known to Mozart from both Handel's *Messiah* and French choral music, are joined to a repeating bass figure somehow reminiscent of music Mozart may also have known: the Crucifixus from Bach's *Mass in B Minor*. Bringing together these powerful, bygone gestures is of course no mere display of compositional brilliance; its purpose is to portray graphically and almost physically the scourging Jesus underwent before his crucifixion. The *Quoniam tu solus*, a bright, contrapuntal trio for two sopranos and tenor, leads to the Gloria's triumphant, double-fugue conclusion, *Cum sancto spiritu*.

The Sanctus is also a double chorus, though homophonic—a rarity in this Mass, as Mozart proclaims Isaiah's ancient invocation in solemn, brass-thick chords. The two settings of *Osanna in excelsis*, surrounding the solo quartet's *Benedictus*, are again polyphonic.

The Mass's most extended musical treatment is of *Et incarnatus est*, the words with which Mozart's setting of the Credo ends. Recounting the miraculous birth of the Christ child, this aria for Soprano I is cast in what became, during his decade in Vienna, his most distinctive idiom: the pastoral. This, too, had numerous models in Handel and Bach, among them "Come Unto Him" and the "Pastoral Symphony" (Pifa) in *Messiah*, an oratorio he came to know intimately. He also draws on his Mannheim experiences, calling for a woodwind trio of flute, oboe, and bassoon—traditional pastoral instruments—to welcome the soprano's entrance with garlands of florid runs that seem to put us in mind of birds in paradise. The soloist—who most assuredly was Constanze—joins their song when she arrives at the word Mozart emphasizes quite exorbitantly: *factus* ("made" or, in this case, "born"). The gentle 6/8 rhythms of a *siciliana* are here a mother's lullaby. There seems no question that this magnificent aria celebrates both the safe delivery of the Mozarts' baby boy and the birth of God's son.

But there is a tragic ending to this story. Departing for Vienna the morning after the performance, Wolfgang and Constanze arrived home only to discover that Raimund Leopold had died of an intestinal infection. Apparently, they had not been notified of this before.

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